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Invisible artist emerges from the background of her works

Paredes' work a staple of Fotoseptiembre

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"La Dorsal" is one of the photo performances by Cecilia Paredes that the artist refers to as having a "silent" background. The black and white stripes of kimono-like garment — and the title of the piece — allude to a geologic feature shared by Peru and Chile, neighboring countries with a long history of conflict.

Cecilia Paredes likes to joke that she has aerial roots — "you know, like the orchids."

Indeed, at 64, the internationally known, Peruvian-born artist has, no doubt, logged an impressive number of hours in the ether. She traveled abroad first for her studies, then traversed the globe with her then-husband, a United Nations officer, and for her career.

It was Paredes' need to feel a connection to the various places she found herself — to, in effect, become part of the landscape — that lead to her best-known works, “photo performances” in which she camouflages herself with paint or fabric to blend into elaborately patterned backgrounds.

In “The Wandering Flight,” an exhibit at Ruiz-Healy Art for Fotoseptiembre USA, Paredes has absorbed the landscape in new photographic works and is spreading her wings in woven pieces made with feathers.

Three of the seven large-scale photographic works in the show are what Paredes refers to as “silent” — she has replaced the visually thrumming backgrounds of previous works with voids of black or white. In “Silk,” Paredes sits cross-legged, appearing to levitate in inky darkness, her hands and face painted to match the floral pattern of her pajama like garments. In “En tus Alturas (In the Height of Your Sky),” she sits facing a white wall, wrapped in tartan. The plaid pattern extends from her shoulders to the exposed skin of her neck and cheek.

While the artist uses herself as a model, Paredes refers to the figure in her photographic works variously as “she,” “the person,” or “the character” rather than “I.”

In the images with a black or white background, “it’s a little bit the idea of she is already the landscape,” said Paredes, who moved to Philadelphia with her husband, an opera composer, in 2005, and maintains a studio in Lima. “It means she has the landscape contained in her own body and doesn’t need the support anymore.”

The exhibit is Paredes' second solo show at the gallery, where her work has been a staple of Fotoseptiembre exhibits since gallerist Patricia Ruiz-Healy began working with her in 2007.

“She’s on her game,” Ruiz-Healy said. “It’s not like she wasn’t before, but I just think that she’s continuing to produce really important work that relates to so many issues — issues of migration and adapting to new environments.”

Born in Lima, Paredes studied fine arts at the Catholic University of Lima, Cambridge Arts and Crafts School in England and the Accademia del Nudo in Rome.

Early in her studies, she said, “I thought I had made a huge mistake and that I really wanted to do theater.”

Paredes took acting classes in the evenings and went to school during the day. Her work began to suffer.

“My director, who was a wise German old man, called me and said, ‘You have to decide.’ He literally said, ‘Both things is to have two lovers,’” Paredes recalled. “So I had to decide and I stayed with art.”

Early in her career, Paredes focused on drawing, printmaking and painting. But she was unsatisfied. Her need for a challenge lead her to begin creating photo performances in 2000 when she was living in Costa Rica. Paredes affixed dragonflies to the bare skin of her back for her first piece, “El Vuelo (The Flight).”

“I felt I was not very happy because I was not risking perhaps too much in my career and I did this turn completely to the (performative) act,” Paredes said. “Many years after, I was in the opera and I was thinking, ‘Well, I think I’m doing theater after all.’”

About four years later, she started working with feathers, after she discovered a man who lived nearby rescued animals, including *papagallos* — large parrots — taken from poachers. Each Sunday, she traveled to the makeshift sanctuary to collect feathers, amassing enough to weave a shawl that was almost 9-feet by 9-feet. She exhibited the piece in the 2005 Venice Biennial.

The tapestries in “The Wandering Flight” are a little less than half the size and have much humbler beginnings. Paredes made the pieces with chicken feathers purchased in New York. Bird of origin aside, feathers — once believed to be a conduit for communicating with the divine in Peruvian culture — remain an important symbol in Paredes’ work, as is flight.

One of the pieces by Paredes that first caught Ruiz-Healy's eye alluded to flight.

"For me, that was a very beautiful metaphor because I think for a woman, it's very important — the idea that we can go places; the idea that we can move forward," she said. "That got me into thinking that I really wanted to get into a deeper conversation about her and her work."

When Paredes first left her home country, she said she "really resented a lot the fact that I had to leave Peru and live elsewhere. Then of course, I was blessed, because elsewhere was always an amazing place."

With Philadelphia as home base for the last 10 years, however, "I feel very comfortable being part of this," she added.

Recently, she noticed a narrative trajectory in her photo performances that mirrors her own story.

"In the beginning, the image of the person is totally still. Then the person gets a little more confidence and starts moving along, mimicking the background with hands, etc.," Paredes said. "And now, the background is gone and it's completely contained in the body."

"I only realized this when I had a big exhibition and I saw my work all laid (out) there and I thought, 'OK, look at this.' I never planned it to be like this, but I guess it comes because it is true."

"The Wandering Flight" opens with a reception 6-8 p.m. Thursday; through Oct. 10, Ruiz-Healy Art, 201-A E. Olmos Drive, 210-804-2219, www.ruizehealyart.com

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